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Citation for published version:

Hilton, J & Prior, S 2018, Revisoning person-centred research. in M Bazzano (ed.), *Revisoning Person-Centred Therapy: Theory and Practice of a Radical Paradigm*. Routledge, London, pp. 277-287.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351186797>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.4324/9781351186797](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351186797)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Revisoning Person-Centred Therapy

Publisher Rights Statement:

This is an Accepted Manuscript of a book chapter published by Routledge in Re-Visioning Person-Centred Therapy: Theory and Practice of a Radical Paradigm on 27/06/2018, available online: <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/e/9781351186780>

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Re-visioning Person-Centred Research

Jo Hilton and Seamus Prior

Abstract Students of the person centred approach frequently comment on how there is something nourishing and inspiring about reading the work of Carl Rogers. I/we would argue, in common with Bondi and Fewell (2016) and Canavan and Prior (2016) that this is no accident. Much of Rogers writing can be understood as ‘experience near’ (Canavan and Prior, 2016) and ‘phronetic’, drawing on the work of Aristotle, described by Dunne (2005) as practical, rather than technical rationality. In recent years, the approach has arguably been drawn towards proving itself in a way that speaks to a technical rationality. Our suggestion is that we need to return to the rough ground and value our work appropriately.

Introduction

In this chapter, we return to Carl Rogers’ early development as a researcher in order to provide the basis for a potential re-visioning of person-centred research for our own times. We argue that both his practice and his conceptualisation of research were profoundly reflexive, grounded in an appreciation of the subjectivity of both researcher and the researched, informed by life contexts and experiences of power, and produced in and through the professional wisdom of clinical practice.

We demonstrate how important strands of influence on Rogers’ early writing and theorising seem to have been under-acknowledged within mainstream person-centred training and research in the UK. In particular, we highlight the strong influence on Rogers’ thinking of the pioneering work of psychiatric social workers Jessie Taft, Virginia Robinson, and Frederick Allen in Philadelphia in the 1930s, themselves followers of the psychoanalyst, Otto Rank, with whom Rogers also had a meaningful exchange early in his career.

In developing this perspective of Rogers as a reflexive researcher, we bring back to the research table the value of forms of research that include the reflexive process of the researcher, rather than viewing this as bias that needs to be set aside or bracketed.

Against the backdrop of the rise of the evidence-supported validated therapy research paradigm (House and Loewenthal, 2008), with its importation of research instruments from academic psychology and medicine, we recall Rogers' characterisation of his psychotherapeutic research as a *social science*. As you read our chapter, we invite you to consider research approaches that are congruent with person-centred theories of what it means to be human and person-centred practices which prize subjectivity and inter-subjectivity.

This chapter is written in the form of a personal narrative. It tells the story of how the first author (Jo) came to discover Carl Rogers – the person, practitioner, theorist and researcher in an iterative way over more than a decade of immersion in person-centred scholarship and practice. The second author (Seamus) has served as a partner in dialogue with Jo, helping to shape her ideas and ultimately her writing. While the bulk of this chapter is Jo's work, Seamus too has had an important hand in its creation and is named as a co-author.

Jo's Narrative of Encountering Rogers

I present my account of re-visioning Carl Rogers as a reflexive researcher in a reflexive way, referring to my own experience of reading the work of Carl Rogers and the body of scholarship that has grown up around him. This is not because I believe my perspective to be uniquely accurate in some objective way -- quite the reverse, my position is highly subjective. Rather, I am interested in how subjective experience can contribute to a debate within the person centred approach, especially a debate about the influence of subjective experience.

Encounter 1. Early readings of Rogers.

My first reading of Carl Rogers' life story was Brian Thorne's biography (Thorne, 2003). My memory of this account was of encountering Rogers' life as a collection of key facts in a slim volume. It felt important, to me, for some reason, to know Rogers the man as well as the theorist. I read the story of a boy who grew up in a somewhat traditional, religious family in Oak Park, Chicago. After a spell at agricultural college and a trip to China and Japan, he changed direction once or twice, moving through the fields of history and theology before transferring to the study of psychology, finding work in a child guidance setting in Rochester, New York. One day a mother of a child who was attending the centre asked if he would see adults. He spent some sessions with her and, so the story goes, the field of person-centred counselling was invented.

According to Thorne (2003), Rogers and colleagues discovered the value of recording client work using the glass discs that were available at the time and brought a step towards a more 'objective' science to the study of therapy, hitherto only accessible to those who had completed a psychoanalytic apprenticeship at great expense. They discovered six “necessary and sufficient conditions for therapeutic change” (Rogers, 1957, p95). Rogers went on to develop his work by focusing on large groups and to the potential of group work to help address conflict in communities.

I liked this view of Rogers; it felt safe and reliable. I felt as if I could trust him. His life, as told by Brian Thorne, resonated with some of my own story, coming from a family where religion was important, not in a pious way, but in a genuinely prayerful way, at least before bedtime and at church on Sundays. At other times my family was all about science, the teaching of

science and mathematics, knowing the 'right' way to apply a formula and getting the 'right' answer.

Later at university I had learned another side of mathematics as a student of the subject, mathematics as an art and as a form of philosophy. I was introduced to the concept of 'uncertainty' in quantum physics. This theory overturned a world view based on a belief in determinism, where causes could be linked to associated 'determining' effects in a highly predictive way. It also challenged the very idea of neutral, unbiased observation and of objectivity itself. This chimed with Donna Haraway's (1988, p. 590) suggestion that feminism seeks "better accounts of the world" that do not pretend "to be from everywhere and so nowhere".

In recent years, Wolter-Gustafson (2013, p 107) has discussed Rogers' position as a non-linear, non-dualistic approach to the organism, respecting "the complexity of the organism's tenacious tendency to maintain and enhance health, wellness, and optimal functioning, as well as the way it becomes disorganized and dysfunctional". This fits well with my earliest reading of the PCA, with experience being understood as having an *influence* on complex developmental processes rather than setting off some kind of knowable, causal chain of events.

Another strand of my interest in how life evolves was rooted in my experience of conflict. I had grown up in the 1970s and 80s when the fallout from the 'Troubles' in Northern Ireland had led to bombs and bloodshed in Manchester, my first home, and central London, my second. I found comfort in hearing that Rogers did not restrict himself to the counselling room, but was active in helping people meet to work with difference and division. It seemed like a very

powerful approach that foregrounded the potential for human encounter to support the healing of rifts within and between communities.

As I went on to read more of his writing (Rogers 1951, 1957, 1961, 1980; Rogers & Stevens, 1967) I felt drawn to a man who seemed to have a very open relationship with his readers, able to act as a communicator of ideas that came out of collaborations with others. I had come across the idea of *reflexivity* in practice in the work of Donald Schön (1983) and I saw Rogers' way of writing about and learning from his work to the idea of *reflective practice*, even though I did not find this perspective echoed in the secondary sources.

Encounter 2. The philosophy years.

As I progressed through my training, practice and my own scholarship, I became fascinated by the worlds of ideas in which Rogers and his colleagues engaged. I saw the approach as very much rooted in philosophy and I devoured philosophical theories, although often I struggled to read far enough beyond what was being said to make my own sense of what was being said. I read Rogers' dialogues with Buber and May (Rogers, Henderson & Kirschenbaum, 1989), Buber's *I and Thou* (1959) and the philosophical explorations of Gendlin (1997). I tried to learn enough about philosophy to find a key to the person-centred approach. I felt drawn to Heidegger (1976) and the ethical perspective of Levinas (Levinas, Cohen and Poller, 2006), alongside the work of Schmid (2017) in trying to articulate the underlying philosophy of the approach. While some of the concepts fitted well at times, in terms of a core way of addressing the problem of living, I felt my ideas were becoming less grounded in something that felt personally meaningful.

As I was also studying the development object relations theory in Scotland, I wondered about how the Scottish enlightenment philosopher Adam Smith's (2011) view of 'sympathy' in

relationship and John McMurray's (1991, 1998) thoughts on personhood and relationship might be linked to person-centred theory. The core underlying principles of the person-centred approach seemed to me to be less about individuals and their wants and needs, and more about the 'self as agent' (McMurray, 1991) and 'persons in relation' (McMurray 1998, Kirkwood 2002, 2003, 2005).

As I moved into my own research, the work of David Rennie (1998, 2007) offered further insight into a how a radically reflexive position, where reflexivity is defined as self-awareness "and radical reflexivity as awareness of self-awareness" (Rennie, 2007, page p 53) can help identify ways in which a client's sense of agency develops as a significant aspect of the counselling process. Rennie links his work to Gendlin's focus on *explicating the implicit* (1997) which privileged "experiencing". I wondered how the researcher's experience and sense of agency might be included in therapy research, as my reading of many counselling research papers seemed to exclude this aspect of the story or identify it as 'bias'. Although these ideas felt important, it seemed to take me further away from where I started. I could not find one perspective that fully spoke to me in the way that that first encounter with Rogers did.

Encounter 3. Turbulence.

I began to experience uncertainty and doubt and for a while I was unsure if the turbulence I experienced was internal or external. Perhaps, I thought, this is an essential part of finding a way in a world that asks complex questions that cannot be answered easily. Maureen O'Hara and Graham Leicester (2012, p. x) describe their experience of working with colleagues to discover ways to "become more effective and responsible in action in a world we don't understand and can't control". I think that my own 'conceptual emergency', to borrow their phrase, led me to wonder what was valuable in the person-centred approach if we were to move towards Rogers' (1980, p. 339) suggestion of the attributes of 'persons of tomorrow'?

Certainly my early confidence in following Rogers' espoused path as a pure, empirical scientist had long faded. It had promised a lot but had not seemed to fit the complexity of what I was trying to understand in my research which was looking at moments in a therapy relationship. The act of observation, I was taught in quantum theory classes during my first degree, cannot help but change what is being observed. The empirically-supported evidence-based approach, with its epistemological foundation in rationalism and positivism, seemed to me to suffer from as much epistemological inconsistency and blindness to what it means to be truly human as early biological determinism.

My second area of concern lay in the idea that there are 'tribes' of the person-centred approach. I have found that Margaret Warner (2000) characterises the fragility that I experience in clients, friends, colleagues and myself in the least pathologizing way that I know. Garry Prouty (2002) extends the ways in which therapists can reach others when the first condition, psychological contact, feels only attainable in snatches. The arguments around the primacy of some aspects of theory over others became foregrounded for me when I heard Jerrold Bozarth characterise approaches that direct clients towards 'emotion' (Greenberg, Rice, & Elliot 1993; Greenberg 2004) or the 'felt sense' (Gendlin 1997) as 'mutations' (Bozarth, personal communication). That metaphor felt harsh to me at first, but when he explained it to me in terms of tomatoes, rather than viruses, it felt more accepting of change and growth; an organic movement reaching beyond the original perspective of what the person-centred approach might mean.

As my interest in process-experiential, emotion-focused therapy (Greenberg, Rice, & Elliot 1993; Greenberg 2004) and the approach overall grew, I was introduced to a person-centred research active community that seemed to function happily with research methods favoured in clinical and academic psychology. Although I was impressed with the inroads they were

helping to make in to the evidence-based research model (Saxon et al, 2017), I started to feel less at home there. They seemed to me to be moving further away from therapy research as a social science, as the study of people in relation, than where I wanted to locate myself.

Encounter 4: A return to the early days of Rogers

In my confusion and uncertainty at this time, I was reminded that it had not only been Rogers the scientist that had appealed to me, but Rogers the person, and I returned to Rogers' personal story to revisit my experience of him.

Reading the twenty year old Rogers' account of his journey to China in 1922 (Cornelius White, 2012) helped me reconnect with the young Rogers who was an acute observer of the world. I was fascinated that he had hauled a 25lb typewriter with him, so he could capture his observations, whether of world religions, political systems, the industrial splendour of the Golden Gate Bridge or the raw beauty of Mount Fuji. This reminded me of the idea that narrative can *not only be a way of describing something you already know, but of learning something new, possibly even becoming someone new* (White and Epston, 1990).

Fellow researchers, including some of my more psychodynamically oriented colleagues, had been working more explicitly with narrative as inquiry for a long time (Etherington, 2000, 2001, 2004; Denzin and Lincoln 2000; Lee & Prior, 2016; Wyatt 2016). I recognised it was a strand in my own life and process of inquiry that I had lost connection with, as I had immersed myself in the work of others and the more ascendant evidenced-based research tradition.

I looked again at Rogers' early writings and remembered a passage in Brian Thorne's (2003) book about Rogers' making reference to Jessie Taft. While I knew her to be a key link back to psychoanalysis as the biographer of Otto Rank, I had no idea of her as a writer in her own right

and I had not come across any direct evidence of her work in my original person-centred training.

I turned to a number of original texts, including those included in Howard Kirschenbaum's *Carl Rogers Reader* (1990) and found that Taft went unmentioned in the index. Yet she was there, quietly, buried in a reference to his time in Rochester, where Rogers said that he felt much more at home with the psychiatric social workers and did not feel that he was a psychologist at all:

During this period I began to doubt if I was a psychologist. The University of Rochester made it clear that the work that I was doing was not psychology ...The psychiatric social workers however seemed to be talking my language. (Rogers, 1957 p. 12).

Having earlier reflected that he saw the psychoanalysis of his early Freudian learning and the statistical, objective approach of the Teachers College at Columbia University as ‘never the twain shall meet’ (1957, p. 11), it was interesting to note the shift when Rogers came across Otto Rank, described here:

... during the second half of this period there were several individuals who brought into our group the controversial therapeutic views of Otto Rank and the Philadelphia group of social workers and psychiatrists whom he had influenced. Personal contact with Rank was limited to a three-day institute we arranged; nevertheless his thinking had a very decided impact on our staff and helped me to crystallize some of the therapeutic methods we were groping toward (Rogers 1959, p. 187).

The unnamed Philadelphia social workers, who had developed relationship therapy, linking their work to Otto Rank's ‘will therapy’, were Jessie Taft, Virginia Robinson, and Frederick Allen, according to Roy de Carvalho (1999). Keith Tudor (2017, p, 199) notes that this early

relationship therapy pre-dates the “relational turn” that is usually attributed to Greenberg and Mitchell (1983) by half a century.

Nathaniel Raskin (1948) attempts to unravel this period to detect some of the ways in which their work was to influence Rogers. He suggests that their attraction for Rogers, based on his experiences of working in a social work context rather than with psychologists, was their interest in a less directive, more relational approach to clients. They recognised the significance of working in the 'here and now' with their young clients, in an attuned way, working with acceptance of the client in their world, rather than with theories that privilege the therapist's role in guiding the client towards insight. This influential group of social worker-therapists used the words, “reflective, passive, and non-invasive” to describe their technique (de Carvalho, 1999, p139).

For the first time, I could reconnect to my early reading of Rogers. I saw that in bringing in his own experience, he was borrowing from what we might now think of as a reflexive form of discourse and that was, at some point in his experience, very valuable to him.

Raskin (1948) suggests that Rogers did not have a great deal of time for reading the work of European analysts and that most of his learning came partly from meeting Rank, but also from reading Taft's work and working alongside her. This does not surprise me as Taft, like Rogers, writes evocatively. See this example:

One might fairly define relationship therapy as a process in which the individual finally learns to utilize the allotted hour from beginning to end without undue fear, resistance, resentment or greediness. When he can take it and also leave it without denying its value, without trying to escape it completely or keep it forever because of this very value, in so far he has learned to live, to accept this fragment of time in and for itself, and strange as it may seem, if he can live this hour, he has in his grasp the secret of all hours, he has conquered life and time for the moment (Taft 1933, p17)

This writing of Taft's resonates with the Rogers I had first connected with, a highly reflexive writer, who attends to narrative unfolding and intersubjective relating as a way of learning.

Rogers expressed his dissatisfaction with the psychology of the day, arguably because he had so often inhabited the role of 'other'. He was not just working alongside social work colleagues in a child guidance clinic, he was exposed to a field of practice, learning and research that had been systematically excluded from what then constituted the academic field of psychology. Like Freud before him, Rogers found himself, his practice and his thinking excluded from the mainstream of orthodox academia.

As I have argued, Jessie Taft is very much part of this story. Taft was not just the biographer of Rank, a link to a field of study that was important in American understanding of the human condition, she was also a leading player in the field of sociology, described by Mertens (2012), as one of the few fields open to her after the completion of her PhD in 1913. Mertens (2012, writes,

No university job awaited her. Reason and intellect, it was thought, belonged properly to men; women should concern themselves with maternal care and domestic virtue. And so, like many other talented young women of her day, Taft turned to social work—seen as an extension of maternal care and thus open to women.

Further exploration of this theme by de Carvalho suggests that

"female social workers were important disseminators of both Rank's and Rogers' views. Most American followers of Rank were women working in the fields of child guidance and social work. Rogers himself had a long-standing connection to both fields. The Rankian and Rogerian emphasis on nurture and empathy in therapeutic relationships appealed to female professionals who felt constrained by a strict subordination to psychiatric (i.e., male) supervision and desired to gain a toehold in the independent practice of psychotherapy. Professional conflicts before and after the second world war between male-dominated psychiatry and female clinical professions over the autonomous practice of psychotherapy contributed mightily to the early popularity of person-centered psychotherapy (de Carvalho 1999, p. 133).

In terms of our theme of research, Taft is acknowledged by Raskin (1948, p.100) as believing, like Rank and other psychoanalysts, that therapy is "purely individual, non-moral, non-scientific, non-intellectual" and that it is " non-scientific and not open to research at the moment". Taft and her colleagues could not see their work as belonging in the mainstream of psychiatric and psychological research as defined in 1930s and 1940s America, yet we can reclaim them today as the pioneers of the reflexive research tradition in psychotherapeutic research which Rogers did so much to popularise. De Carvalho (1999, p.139) argues that by 1951 Rogers had adopted, adapted and replaced "Rankian terms such as passive, non-invasive, and reflective with the terms non-directive and client-centered".

Based on de Carvalho's (1999) description of the politics of the day, Rogers actively chose to dissociate himself from the more sociologically-framed form of inquiry developed by Taft and colleagues to espouse a more empirical perspective. Maureen O'Hara (1995) identifies some tension between Rogers writing as an objective scientist and his later work, arguing that his writing could also be understood as the act of a radical subjectivist.

Although Rogers describes his involvement with his social work colleagues' thinking and practice as highly influential in the development of his early thinking about relational therapy, by 1942 he was able to write with excitement about his experience of recording client sessions on film and the opportunities this opened up for him. His narrative here seems very clearly imbued with a sense of therapeutic research as a science and something that is objective. This makes sense to me as a reaction to the potential for a therapist, whether relying on psychoanalytical interpretation or psychological interviewing techniques, to offer the only story of a session. Rogers was excited by the potential to see inside the room as an outside observer, without the intrusion of having to be physically present. He writes:

These brief illustrations may serve to point out the way in which vague therapeutic concepts can be given life and meaning and definition through presenting them, not in abstract form, not from

the point of view of a biased observer, the counselor, but in a completely factual manner as mechanically recorded. Rogers 1942, p431)

Based on what has been said before, I have difficulty accepting his reliance on the outside observer as being an objective viewer of the therapy.

I would echo Jessie Taft in suggesting that the science here might be somewhat overstated. Rogers was not, in any way, a neutral, dispassionate observer. He was a highly skilled therapist by then, who had absorbed a great deal, not just from the theories of the day, including his interest in a Rankian perspective on psychotherapy, but also from his travels, his engagement with others interested in therapy and social work. His observations were those of a highly trained man working with colleagues who also had experience and who, it could be argued, were looking at the film with the perspective of experts, drawing on their professional wisdom (Carr et al 2011) and the wisdom of practice (Bondi and Fewell, 2016).

It is always a problem looking into the past with the eyes of the present, but I wondered if Rogers was ever able to return to this idea of being an objective observer. I found myself considering if he ever acknowledged his own experience of what I would describe as being a reflexive researcher in his writings. I was looking for more than an acknowledgement of the author's bias, as if that could be set aside, or bracketed; I wanted to see a Rogers talking about how his reflexivity contributed to his research as if it was a valuable factor, not an inhibiting process.

It took surprisingly little time to have my desire met, and in some ways it is a disappointment to me not to have searched for this sooner. I notice an old, somewhat critical voice within myself noticing this error.

I think that if I had been starting to write this narrative all over again, this may have been a worthwhile starting point, but as instead I have followed my interest in subjective experience, I have allowed myself to use writing as a way of unravelling my understanding. I felt the rather

knotted ball of wool that has occupied my body as I have been writing this narrative ease a little and I feel myself back on what Dunne (2009) describes, after Wittgenstein, as the ‘rough ground’.

We have got on to slippery ice where there is no friction and so in a certain sense the conditions are ideal, but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk. We want to walk: so we need friction. Back to the rough ground!” (Wittgenstein 2009 p. 51)

As I read the following extract from Rogers (1949), it confirms my first reading of Rogers as someone able to acknowledge the complexity of the counselling and the research process, able to write personally about professional experience. In short, it confirms my understanding of Rogers as a self-avowedly reflexive researcher.

Psychotherapy, as it is individually experienced in the office, is a thing of subtlety, of nuances, of delicate shadings in attitude and relationship which produce clinically obvious results. Research seems to be such a plodder. It laboriously uncovers the obvious. It discovers a general principle, but in the process of doing so tramples into the dust so many of the subtleties which may contain the vital ingredient of therapy. It seems so pedestrian, where clinical intuition is a galloping steed. Yet as our research piles up – not only this series of studies, but the many that preceded it, and the many that are presently being carried on concurrently – we have become more satisfied with it. To be sure, it lags in some ways far behind our clinical sensitivity. Yet as it turns the blazed trail into a solid roadway, it discovers new vistas and new truths of its own. Furthermore, as the body of evidence accumulates it begins to suggest pathways which have been undiscovered even by clinical hunch. We feel, with increasing certainty, that the delicate and fragile web of interrelationship which is therapy will steadily yield its secrets to research, to the benefit of the client, the therapist, and most of all, to the whole field of social science.” (Rogers 1949, p. 152)

And he goes on to argue that he wants his words in this paper to be acknowledged as more than “old fashioned personal testimony” (Rogers 1949, p. 153). In doing so, he is claiming a legitimate role for reflexivity in research practice.

Conclusion

We argue here that the time has come for us to acknowledge the roots of the person-centred movement in the reflexively grounded and practice-oriented sociology of Taft and colleagues. In re-visioning the future of person-centred research we care about, we need to think about the kind of future research that values the reflexive voice of the researcher, made explicit in our research. We need to conceptualise person-centred research as embedded in a broad view of the whole spectrum of the social sciences. We need to return to the origins of our research tradition, find our voice again and liberate ourselves from the need to speak the research language of the biological and behavioural sciences.

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